

The Marginalized Voices in the Selected Short Narratives by Bama and Gogu Shyamala

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Abstract: Autobiography, as a medium of expression has always been the favourite of dalit women since the beginning of their writing. Dalit women raise their voices through the personal narratives in the male dominated society. But their voices have been neglected in the academic circle as they question the hegemony of upper-caste and challenge dalit patriarchy together. Most of dalit women's autobiographies have been written in the regional languages and they have hardly been translated into English. That is why, dalit women's autobiographies are still faceless and nameless in the mainstream literary circle. Dalit writing in Maharashtra has been more powerful as compared to other states in India. The present paper is focused on the autobiography of Baby Kamble, a leading figure in Marathi dalit women writing. It examines the way Baby Kamble defines body, culture and society for a dalit woman in her autobiography *The Prisons we Broke*. The emphasis is on the study of physical, psychological and cultural consequences of dalit women's domination and the growing consciousness among them. As a voiceless group dalit women are trying to be vocal collectively to acquire agency and autonomous identity.

Keywords: Body, Culture, Society, Voice, Agency and Identity.

Dalit writing in India is generally considered as an act of transformation from rejection into resistance. Dalits, who constitute the lowest section of caste-based Indian society live on the social and cultural periphery. As one of the marginalized groups dalits have no access to power and resources. They have been tamed for centuries on the name of religion and god. It is explained metaphysically that the dalits are born to serve the four 'varnas' and the servitude is their true religion. So, to enslave and maltreat dalits is not sin for a 'savarna' Hindu as they have been cursed by god to be treated like this. But dalits reject all these false explanations in their writings. Dalit literature is a collective effort to come to the centre from social, cultural and political margins. According to Bill Ashcroft, G. Griffith and H. Tiffin "the perception and description of experience as marginal is a consequence of the binaristic structure of various kinds of dominant discourses, such as patriarchy, imperialism and ethnocentrism, which imply that certain forms of experience are peripheral" (135). The voices as articulated in dalit literature are reactionary and resistant. Sharn Kumar Limbale observes that the rejection and revolt are obvious to dalit literature as they have been birthed from the womb of dalits pain (31).

The movement initiated by B. R. Ambedkar for the liberation of dalits had an appeal for unity, education and agitation of dalits. He rightly observed that the dalits who are conscious of their pathetic condition can assert their liberation strongly. Guy Poitevin observes that by assertion of dalits

we mean the will and ways that marginalized individuals employ to raise dissent and to explicitly refute the authority of social and cultural codes that degrade, stigmatize and marginalize them. They disown, denounce and refuse to yield silently (36). Dalit literature, which is written out of social commitment has its birth from 'Dalit Panther'- a mass-movement of dalits during 1970s in Maharashtra. This movement had been a chief instrument in founding dalit writing as a separate discipline (Mukharjee 14). But dalit literature too has its drawbacks and the limitations as it is not unified whole and has the different perspectives and point-of-views as male and female. Moreover, there exists a caste hierarchy even in dalit community itself. The writing of dalit men is considered marginal and the literature of women is considered as being beyond marginal (Raj Kumar 157). Dalit critics and intellectuals are of the opinion that the patriarchy practiced in dalit family is more democratic than the Hindu patriarchy. They argue that dalit women enjoy many liberties which are not allowed to 'Savarna' women. As the foot touching is not customary in a dalit family and the systems like sati, dowry and purdha are not observed in dalit community. Dalit women can abuse their husband publically for hurting them. But dalit women challenge this notion by arguing that how an exploitative society can be democratic? Dalit women present dalit men as women because they too are 'other' for Savarns. They have to face the caste based discrimination and frequent violence. Even sometimes they are forced to eat human waste or drink urine. Dalit men can show their masculinity only to their wives, daughters and sisters and can shed-off their frustration by beating them at home. So dalit women's struggle is against the domination within and outside society. As a result, dalit women's writing is more powerful, change oriented and resistance as compared to dalit male writers. S.K. Paul observes, "there is very few resistance in dalit writing if there is any that too is by female protagonist" (274). The selected short narratives analyzed in this paper are by Tamil dalit woman writer Bama in *Kisumbukkaran* and Telgu female voice in dalit writing Gogu Shyamala in *Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a small basket, but...* There is a strong voice of protest against casteism and gender discrimination in these stories. The traditional silence on the name of religion, culture and god is broken by these marginalized figures. Both writers show dalits as the victims of casteism, poverty and landlordism. But the characters as portrayed by these writers are conscious beings and initiate a joint movement against the exploitation based on caste and gender. In 'pongal', a short story by Bama, the protest of a dalit is shown through Esaki, the son of Mandasami. He rejects the tradition of giving gifts to the high-caste landlords. He says:

Why do we have to take all this to the landlord? If we made a curry with them, we would have a hearty meal for once, at least. (3).

Esaki represents the anger of the new generation of dalits and shows the commitment to change the existing order of casteism. The indifference which landlord shows to Mandasami and his family makes him to realize that his son Esaki was right when he denied to present gifts to landlord. Dalit literature itself is revolutionary as it deconstructs the myths and

questions the foundation of Hinduism. D. Padamrani is of the opinion that dalit literature is written with the purpose of conveying the anguish and suffering of dalit and demand an antidote for it. It derives its strength through the depiction of hard reality and its aim is not to teach (84). Dalits are humiliated and beaten continuously but despite of all these odds and atrocities they are full of strength and self-esteem. They can reply accordingly for their insult and resist the violence as Ammasi does in 'anachi' by Bama. Ammasi refused to stand-up for a high-caste landlord in the bus. He says: "I can't get up and I will not. And saying anymore will not add to your stature". (10). This incident in the local bus is the subject of general talk among dalits and non-dalits of village. The poor illiterate found it wrong for a dalit to be rude and disrespectful to a high-caste landlord. But Ammasi refused to bow to the authority of casteists. Even before the 'panchayat' he talks in a sarcastic manner and mocks the casteism. Dalits are trying to change their long imposed identity. Bama shows that the influences of casteism and landlordism are diminishing with the passage of time, however, the process is very slow. All this is the result of education and growing consciousness among dalits. Masanam Thatha, an old dalit in the story 'those days' makes a comparison between the past and present. He narrates his personal experiences and tells the readers that in the old days dalits were treated like animals by non-dalits. But the time has changed now and dalits no more are afraid of the high-caste landlords. They are not ready to be trodden like the dust beneath the feet of non-dalits. The angry voices of dalits find an echo in this story. Writes Bama:

Ten thousand is equal to one hair on our legs! Do you think you can compensate us with money? You could, in those days now we are sacred neither of you nor your money. You think you can solve things by buying us. (56).

Dalits now are well aware of the fact that the silence, which has been imposed on them for centuries, will serve no purpose. It is through the assertion and protest that they can get the equal status. Dalit characters as depicted in the stories of Bama are vocal and rebellious who sometimes use aggressive and violent language. States Bama:

"And if something like this happens again your head will be separated from your body". (56). *Kisumbukkaran*, which means a rebellious prankster, has the ten short stories in all. Dalits revolt against casteism is the soul of each story. Ponnuthayi, a poor young dalit lady fights bravely against casteism and internal patriarchy. She is courageous enough to live separately from her husband without caring for the views of people and opinion of society. The stories like 'rich girl', 'half sari' and 'freedom' etc. note the experiences of the suffering and resistance of dalits. Like other dalit writers Gogu Shyamala too writes about her lived experiences by forming a new discourse. In her creative writing, she brings to light the inhuman practices prevalent in repressive patriarchy as domestic violence and discrimination based on caste and gender. As a dalit writer and activist Gogu Shyamala attacks all institutions that victimize and marginalize the dalits. She shows dalit women as the lowest of the low

because of three-fold domination on the account of caste, class and gender. She portrays her male characters as sensitive to the question of women. They prefer to educate their daughters instead of giving them for the public pleasure on the name of traditions. Ballapa, a dalit character in the story 'Raw wound' sends his daughter to hostel for education in the darkness of night. Because he was afraid of the high-caste landlords who want to offer his daughter to a village temple service as a jogini. Shyamala shows that the discrimination based on the principle of purity and pollution has ruined the lives of dalits from generation to generation. Dalits have to face this discrimination even in the public places like schools, colleges, hospitals and railway station etc. In the story entitled as 'Braveheart Badeyya' Badeyya, a dalit boy of Madiga caste family is the victim of casteism even in the school. He has to sit separately in the class to avoid touch with the high-caste students. Badeyya is too young to understand the purpose of this separation. He has to adopt the caste-based occupation of skinning and disposing the dead animals as he could not continue with his study. Shyamala here takes up the problem of school dropouts common in dalit families. Through their personal narratives, dalits tell the 'savarnas' that dalits can educate themselves and can adopt the better professions if they are given the opportunities and proper facilities. The discrimination based on caste filled Adivi with anger and made him rebellious in the story 'obstacle Race'. Adivi is always good in studies and keeps on punishing the upper-caste boys who cannot learn their lessons. But he does not have a peer group in school as he is a boy of low caste family. He has to face the comments that high caste students pass on his caste. But finally he manages to take revenge from the 'savarna' children by touching them. Thus writes Shyamala:

“He made his mind to get back at them somehow. He was waiting for the right time. One day it rained heavily and soon there was knee deep water flowing everywhere. The path was covered with water and slush. Adivi pretended to slip and fall in the mud and slush on the path and caught hold of other kids touching them in the process”. (125).

Non-dalits are apprehensive of the education and the general development of dalits and try to keep them illiterate and powerless. writes Gogu Shyamala:

“Your father is a fool and you are one too! What a thing to do! Teaching that boy to read and write indeed! That fellow is a crafty rascal even without education. He is a baindla boy. The baindla... they are into all kinds of worship and even witchcraft! Imagine what they will do once they are educated. They are going to take over our temples. Give this fellow some education and he will turn into a real sorcerer! So just stop this non-sense, you idiot! Stop it!” (128).

Dalit characters like Adivi, Ballapa, Tataki, Saayamma and Ellamma etc. understand the methods of the high-caste to have authority on dalits. Saayama in the story 'But why shouldn't the Baindla woman ask for her land' is unlettered but she asks for her right to own the land due to a 'jogini'. She refused to perform the ritual function until she gets the share of her land. Writes Shyamala:

“I do. But first tell me about my land. Earlier, when my parental aunt used to perform the ritual function, the Nizam Sarkar gave her three acres of land. Now, that land has been taken over and is being cultivated by one of your cousins. You have to get that land returned to me”. (94).

Saayama is poor, illiterate 'jogini' from low caste but she rejects the exploitative Hindu cultural practices. Most of the characters of Gogu Shyamala are illiterate like Tataki but they understand all the wrongs against them. Thus Gogu Shyamala shows that the roots of dalit liberation movement have reached to the deep in ground and its effects are visible on the grass-root level. Gogu Sjamla, in her writing attacks the casteism, landlordism and gender discriminate. Buts like other dalit feminists she does not blame dalit men for the subjection of dalit women and at the same time she does not celebrates dalit men as ideal beings. She feels that dalit men alone cannot be the bringers of liberation for dalit women as they themselves are marginalized beings. She finds Hinduism responsible for the common plight of dalit men and women . It is the collective responsibility of both dalit men and women to oppose this inhuman practice of untouchability. In her short stories Gogu Shyamala shows dalit communities Mala, Madiga, Golla, Mangali, Eediga, Chakali and Vesta as the victims of casteism and poverty. She attracts our attention to the fact that dalits could not change their condition despite of the constitutional safeguards. The evils as 'devdasi', jogini and 'nagarvadhu' are still in practice even though government has banned them many years before. By such details Gogu Shyamala brings to light the Hindu terrorism which kill and victimize dalits. Shyamala minutely examines the various aspects of the life of dalit. Writes K. Lalita:

“Gogu Shyamala's stories are a treasure-house of knowledge, skills, music and aesthetic of dalit life that are invisible to the rest of society. Stories such as these can come only from a life lived in a dalit world. They provide a window for us to peep in, to grasp, to understand, to digest and sort out. They leave us in awe, amazement, happiness and pain-all at once”. (257).

Dalits of the modern era cannot be repressed and tied in the name of tradition and religion. Dalit characters like Ballamma (called tataki by upper-caste people) can be seen as the representative of modern dalits .The attitude of dalits towards their lives and society has changed. They want to live with dignity as they refuse to be treated as sub-human beings. The unique feature in the writing of Bama and Gogu Shyamala is that some of their male characters are supportive and affectionate to their female characters. The number of such male character is very less. But it seems that with the passage of time dalit men have realized the need and importance of dalit women's liberation.

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